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Kwiatkowski, Fryderyk

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***The Others* (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar in the Light of Valentinian Thought**

Fryderyk Kwiatkowski

Jagiellonian University, Cracow and the University of Groningen

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Fryderyk Kwiatkowski,

"The Others (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar in the Light of Valentinian Thought"

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Abstract: The article offers a Valentinian interpretation of the Hollywood film *The Others* (2001). A particular attention is paid to the ways in which cinematic motifs and narrative elements of the film draw on myths, ideas and symbolic imagery present in Valentinian works, especially in the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3) and the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3). In the course of the heuristic analysis, the paper argues that although the film employs Valentinian ideas, it depicts different understanding of the world. This issue is addressed in the last part of the article by situating the film within broader contexts that refer to the transformations of religion in the second half of the twentieth century in Western societies.

Fryderyk KWIATKOWSKI

***The Others* (2001) by Alejandro Amenábar in the Light of Valentinian Thought**

Introduction

Many scholars agree that in the past few decades religion has progressively gained importance in the public sphere (Moberg and Granholm 97). Although it has been transformed and mediatized, especially through popular culture (Hjarvard; Moberg and Granholm 104-107), this does not make Western culture less religious, but differently religious (Partridge, "Occulture" 116). In previous research, scholars from the field of religion and film have mostly focused on interpreting films in the light of ideas that stem from major religious traditions, e.g., Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism. The consequences drawn from implementing this approach, however, allow one to seek for other religious narratives which have been vibrantly permeating contemporary popular culture works. This is the case with multiple esoteric currents the influence of which on popular culture has been progressively recognized (Granholm; Hanegraaff, "Alan Moore's"; Kripal; Partridge, *The Re-enchantment*). Moreover, scholars have noted that various motifs, ideas, and even the narrative structure of some Hollywood films of the past three decades can be interpreted in the light of the concept of Gnosticism, or at least through myths and ideas that have been most commonly linked with this category in modern scholarship (Hunt; Verarde; Wilson). If we consider Valentinianism as one of many Gnostic movements, which flourished in Late Antiquity, then we can treat the film *The Others*, directed by Alejandro Amenábar, as part of the Gnostic revival in Hollywood cinema in the 1990s and 2000s (Wilson; Kwiatkowski, "How to"; "Climbing a ladder").

As with many recent films in which Gnostic themes have been noticed, there is no available evidence whether the authors of *The Others* were acquainted with the Valentinian/Gnostic thought when they were making it. For this reason, the comparative approach will be used to highlight similarities and differences between the Valentinian thought and ideas expressed in the film. I will argue that the story presented in *The Others* can be treated as a reinterpreted version of a mythological narrative that stems from early Valentinianism. In order to do so, I will base my scrutiny especially on the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3) and the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3) in that regard that the latter shares or complements the former text concerning metaphysical tenets, symbolic use of language, and concepts.

Valentinianism

Valentinians were thought to be the greatest threat to the early orthodox Church. Scholars, however, have started to uncover methodological limitations with using such classifications as "Valentinian" or "Valentinianism." Firstly, they were used to label a heretical movement and show how this school of thought deviated from what was believed to be a normative Christianity. Thus, as Ismo Dunderberg has demonstrated, "when using the opponents' texts as sources, their bias against Valentinians must constantly be kept in mind. These texts do provide us with essential information about the Valentinian theology, but they are not reliable as a record of what Valentinians really taught and how they behaved" (8-9). Secondly, "Valentinianism" suggests a fixed, static identity of its representatives. The term does not take into account either the division between teaching of Valentinus and his followers, which has to be noted, or the fact that this movement was inherently diverse and developed through time. Moreover, in the available primary sources there is no evidence whether Valentinians referred to themselves as such. These methodological problems should not overshadow the fact that several Valentinian texts share fundamental metaphysical assumptions which allow one to speak about the emergence of a certain school of thought. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above and for the purposes of this paper, I will treat the term Valentinianism as a heuristic interpretive tool in order to bring together texts and thinkers for comparison and further analysis. (Lewis 81-2; Linjamaa 192, note 21). This will help to demonstrate similarities between certain ideas formulated in the ancient texts and in the film. By making such comparisons, it will be possible to show that numerous ideas, pictorial metaphors and metaphysical beliefs peculiar to the early Valentinian thought were radically transformed in *The Others*. The outcome of this analysis will lead to the discussion of the general overview of these modifications. In the last part, some suggestions will be made for further research to obtain a better understanding of possible cultural functions that the cinematic reinterpretation of the Valentinian thought may serve for contemporary viewers.

Story

The Others tells the story of Grace Stewart and her two children, Anne and Nicholas. While awaiting for the father of the family, Charles, to return from World War Two, she ran a great country house, situated

on an island, far from the ongoing fighting. The main plot of the film starts with the arrival of three new servants: Bertha Mills, Edmund Tuttle, the gardener, and a mute girl, Lydia. Their presence, however, concurred with a series of strange events that were taking place in the house which led Grace to believe that it was inhabited by ghosts, the eponymous "others." Ultimately, she found out the truth about the intruders and herself due to the actions of the new servants. The twist ending revealed that Grace, while waiting for her husband, had lost her mind, killed her own children, and committed suicide. From that moment onward, they existed as ghosts, but she repressed the knowledge of this and tried to live as if nothing bad had happened. Grace created the illusory place for herself and her children, based on memories from their previous life which, unfortunately, did not bring peace to the phantom family. The others, however, were the living whose world was fused with the realm of ghosts.

Error

Grace reflects many features of Error and Sophia, two crucial female figures in the Valentinian thought (Rudolph 83-84; Dawson; Layton 250; Dunderberg 244, note 1; Magnusson *Bortom vägs ände; Rethinking* 89-92, 179, 181). In the following fragment from the *Gospel of Truth*, we can notice several ideas and metaphorical language associated with Error that can be fruitfully used to elucidate Grace's position in *The Others*:

Inasmuch as the completion of the entirety had searched for the one from whom they had emanated, and the entirety was inside of him – the inconceivable uncontained, who is superior to all thought – ignorance of the father caused agitation and fear. And the agitation grew dense like fog, so that no one could see. Thus error found strength and labored at her matter in emptiness. Without having learned to know the truth, she took up residence in a modelled form, preparing by means of the power, in beauty, a substitute for truth (...) She dwelt in a fog as regards the father, preparing, while she dwelt there, products and forgetfulness and fears, so that then she might beguile those of the middle and take them captive. (NHC I, 3; 17.4-36)

This fragment reveals that the offspring of the Father (the divine), namely the "entirety" or the "aeons" (both terms are used interchangeably in the text), which represent the hypostasised aspects of the divine (van den Broek 159-60), did not know about the origin of their existence. This state of ignorance led to the fear, the production of Error, and eventually to the creation of her material realm. In *The Others*, Grace – similarly to the aeons or Error herself – was also unaware of the origins of her position in the world. While existing as a ghost she repressed the fact that she had killed her children and afterwards committed suicide. Like Error, she fell into the state of oblivion and ignorance leading her to create the deceptive reality. After Grace was transferred into the ghost world, she acted as if nothing had happened and she was still alive – she ran the house, awaited her husband's return from the war, and continued to raise her children who also repressed the memories about the murders. Her state of ignorance and oblivion can be linked with the inexplicable occurrences that started to happen in her house. Not until she received knowledge about the metaphysical position which she held in the world and confronted the fact of her death, could she recognize the illusory reality which she had created. The following fragment from the *Gospel of Philip* fairly well describes Grace's existential condition: "Lack of [acquaintance] is the mother of [all evils]. Lack of acquaintance will lead to [death]: [for] those who existed as a result of the [lack of acquaintance] neither (truly) existed nor [do exist] nor will exist" (NHC II, 3; 83.30-35).

Grace's mansion, situated on an island and isolated from the rest of the world, evokes the void or the empty space in the *Gospel of Truth*, where Error produces her kingdom far away from the centre, namely the Father (Irenaeus, 1.21.4; 2.4.3; Attridge 44). Furthermore, Grace's island was covered with thick fog that never disappeared. This image can be clearly linked with the *Gospel of Truth*, as Error and fog are semantically interconnected with the ideas of ignorance, oblivion (NHC I, 3; 17.10-17). Geoffrey Smith notices that the term "nothingness" in the text occurs especially to describe Error and her domain (75): "for the agitation and forgetfulness and the modeled form of deception were as nothing" (NHC I, 3; 17.24-25); "Error (...) understood nothing" (NHC I, 3; 26.19-23) and "Error is empty, with nothing inside her" (NHC I, 3; 26.26-27). Bentley Layton suggests that the "system of the GTr [*Gospel of Truth*]" is strongly antimaterialist, even illusionist, as regards the reality of material structures. One consequence of acquaintance (*gnosis*) with the all-containing divine Father is to see the illusion that there are material things – indeed the illusion of distinction and structure – fade away into nothingness" (250). In the film, fog plays similar role as in the Valentinian scripture. In both cases, it highlights that the realms created by Grace and Error are in a fundamental way separated from the real world and represent illusionary spaces. This is suggested by Grace: "I'm beginning to feel totally cut off from the world. And this fog doesn't exactly help. It's never lasted this long before." The following fragment from the *Gospel of Truth* illuminate her position: "Those who in the midst of all these troubles see nothing,

for such things are [in fact] nothing. Such are those who have cast off lack of acquaintance from themselves like sleep, considering it to be nothing" (NHC I, 3; 29.26-32). Later in the film, her servants, who already knew that they were all ghosts, also gave their attention to the function of the fog. When Grace was about to go to a village nearby, Bertha Mills concluded that the "fog won't let her get very far." Geoffrey Smith claims that in the *Gospel of Truth* the negative picture of nothingness concerns Error and her dominion, not the matter itself (80). In *The Others*, similarly: the world around Grace is not essentially baleful but was progressively becoming hostile to her because she misinterpreted what was real.

The illusory reality in the *Gospel of Truth* can be interpreted in psychological terms, which are also suitable for use in explaining the reality created by Grace in the film. Layton argues that "The main register of GTr [*Gospel of Truth*] is thus not description of the universe but discussion of knowledge and psychology... In the few passages where mythic cosmology may covertly come into view... the figures and events of myth are psychological" (250). From this perspective, "the origin of error is that the mind, defined as a thinker bringing forth thoughts and perceptions, is projected out, externalized, as an external being bringing forth a world. In the *Gospel of Truth* this is the 'error' that brings forth a non-existent world of oblivion" (Davies). Thus, the material world can be defined as Error's state of consciousness or a result of a mental distortion because of her ignorance of the Father. In *The Others*, Grace's illusory reality can be also described as her externalised state of mind. It resulted from of a cognitive error, an act she made right after she killed her children and herself. Later, she reflected on this: "At first I couldn't understand... what the pillow was doing in my hands... and why you didn't move. But then I knew. It had happened. I had killed my children. I got the rifle... I put it to my forehead... and I pulled the trigger. Nothing. And then I heard your laughter in the bedroom. You were playing with the pillows, as if nothing had happened." Grace's perception of her afterlife was deceptive because – similarly to Error in the *Gospel of Truth* – of the ignorance and oblivion about the origins of her existence. The idea of knowledge in the Valentinian text and in the film is contextualized differently, however. In the *Gospel of Truth*, Error's lack of knowledge is explained strictly in religious terms, whereas in *The Others* Grace's ignorance alludes to the horrible deeds she committed when she was still alive. Nevertheless, the basic principle remains the same: the lack of knowledge about the metaphysical structure of reality makes the world unbearable, full of terror and pain for those who live in it.

The Heart as an Inn

The author of the *Gospel of Truth* described living in the counterfeit reality as "when one falls sound asleep and finds oneself in the midst of nightmares: running toward somewhere – powerless to get away while being pursued... sometimes, too, it seems that one is being murdered, though nobody is giving a chase" (NHC I, 3; 29.8-22). Although in the film there are no appalling scenes as these, Grace thought she was haunted by ghosts and found herself in numerous dreadful situations that correspond with the images depicted in the Valentinian text. For instance, at one occasion instead of seeing a face of her daughter she saw the old woman with strange eyes who, as it turned out later, was a psychic medium, one of "the others." In another scene, Grace heard footsteps around the house and piano playing in the room even though she had closed the doors. The haunted house motif in the film evokes the ancient philosophical-religious concept of the "heart as an inn," or in a different translation "heart as a hostel," which can be found, for example, in the *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI, 1; 6.30-37) and the *Gospel of Philip* (NHC II, 3; 53.11-12). It refers to the idea of the image of the body, the soul, the heart, or the house as an inn that has been taken over by demons. Hippolytus of Rome, the second-third century Christian theologian, encapsulates this idea in the following way: "Now this 'material person' is in their view a 'hostel,' as it were, or dwelling – sometimes of the soul alone, at other times of a soul and demons, and sometimes of the soul and rational principles. These are the rational principles scattered from above into this world away from the common fruit of the fullness and Wisdom [Sophia]. They dwell with the soul in a body of dust, whenever the demons do not inhabit the soul (VI, 34:6). In the film, Grace's estate can be viewed in the light of the concept of the heart as an inn. Before she realized her position in the world, she identified "the others" inhabiting her house precisely as evil spirits.

In the *Gospel of Truth*, the world of Error is pictured as a dark place and contrasted with the illuminating light of knowledge: "As with one person's ignorance (of another) – when one becomes acquainted, ignorance of the other passes away of its own accord; and as with darkness, which passes away when light appears so also lack passes away in completion, ... and it is by acquaintance that all will purify themselves out of multiplicity into unity, consuming matter within themselves as fire, and darkness by light" (NHC I, 3; 24.32-25.19). We can observe a similar opposition between darkness and light in *The Others*. Firstly, the illusory world in the film is represented by the island shrouded in mist and, especially, Grace's house, which was plunged into darkness and pictured as gloomy and dreary

from the outside. As the sun came up every day, she covered the windows with curtains in rooms where her children were about to stay. Grace explained to her servants that Anne and Nicholas suffered from an allergy to sunlight. If this routine is to be interpreted symbolically, then it would be in line with the *Gospel of Truth*. Grace's aversion to light as well as the way how her house was depicted in the film defines her state of ignorance and resembles Error's world of matter, which is not only "nothingness" but also "darkness" (NHC I, 3; 18.16-18, 24.33-38, 25.15-19). The association with the material realm from the *Gospel of Truth* can be further strengthened by Grace's own words. She characterises the time spend on the island as living in "darkness" and being in a "prison."

Emotions as the Basis for the Creation of the World

Both in the *Gospel of Truth* and *The Others* emotions lead to the creation of illusory realities. In the ancient text, Error's agitation, fear, and forgetfulness, caused by her ignorance, formed the basis of matter (NHC I, 3; 17.4-36). In the film, it is suggested that while Grace was waiting for her husband, she gradually felt more anxious and secluded on the island. In a spiritualist session, the old woman, one of "the others," explains that this eventually caused her to get mad.

In this context, it is also fruitful to refer to a theory of emotions understood as the foundation of matter, which was later developed by the followers of Valentinus. In the account of Irenaeus about the Valentinian myth of Sophia, she experienced "affection" or "love" (*storgē*) and despair (*agōn*) because she separated from her partner, Desire. Grace's emotions, viewed as the basis for her deceptive reality, were also caused by her separation from her spouse. Furthermore, Grace, in the similar way as Valentinian Sophia, violated the conventional expectations associated with women and decided to act on her own, without her consort, which resulted in the creation of the false world. Another link between Grace and Sophia pertains to the semantic relationship between the two names in the Valentinian *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5). In the text, the name "Grace" is identified with Silence, Thought, and Sophia (NHC I, 5; 57.3-7).

Error's Earthly Agent

In the light of the Valentinian thought, Grace can also be compared to the ignorant human being who adheres the law of the Old Testament and acts in favour of Error. Magnusson notes that in the *Gospel of Truth* the Old Testament is associated with the Sabbath, which should be regarded as the representation of the cosmic world (*Rethinking* 179). Since Error is presented as a negative and aggressive figure, it would be conflicting if any law established due to her creation could be regarded as rightful whatsoever. In *The Others*, Grace was depicted as strict and pious Catholic, a believer in the harsh law of Yahweh. She quoted passages from the Old Testament numerous times, especially of those which illustrate God as an exacting being who condemns disobedient believers to suffering. For instance, Grace referred to the story from Genesis in which Yahweh called the cherubim with a flaming sword to expel Adam and Eve from Eden and to the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. She also asked Nicholas to elaborate on the metaphysical structure of the hell she had believed to be the correct one. Her son said that limbo comprises one of its parts and Grace added that it is "[a]t the centre of the Earth. Where it's very, very hot. That's where children go who tell lies. But not for a few days, oh no. No, they're damned, forever." It can be said that Grace used the letter of the Bible in order to legitimise her parental power over the children and to make them more obedient. She is mostly focused on stirring up the fear over Anne and Nicholas in order to prevent them from breaking the rules she established. Thus, Grace resembles certain features of Error, the fallen Sophia, and the ignorant human being from the *Gospel of Truth* who unwittingly works in favour of Error.

Proponents of Gnosis

In the *Gospel of Truth*, the receipt of "Gnosis" (gr. "knowledge," "investigation," "insight") entails a completely new way of perceiving reality. In many ancient philosophical-religious Hellenistic writings, the term was broadly used as a reference to the salvific knowledge which concerned the divine sphere, the true nature of things, human origins, and God himself. It was not perceived as a result of rational thinking but of an inner enlightenment, a divine revelation which comes from the higher world. This knowledge involves a discovery that the human nature and his origins is God himself (Hanegraaff, "Gnosis" 381-85; van den Broek 2-3).

According to Anne McGuire, the *Gospel of Truth* "proclaims the good news of conversion for those who have already turned, sets forth a vision of their place in the Father and in relation to the Son, and exhorts them to awaken those who still sleep to their true relation to the Father, the Son, and the rest of the Entirety" (354). When relating this passage and the idea of Gnosis to the film, we could say that Grace's servants represent the awakened ones from the *Gospel of Truth* whose mission is to enlighten

those who live in ignorance. The film suggests that Grace could not have recognised her position in the world if it had not been for the actions of her servants who had possessed the knowledge about the ghost world. Through them, she received the knowledge about the origins of the fake reality she had created for herself and her children, and learned that the realms of living and the dead intermingle.

Einar Thomassen elaborates that in the *Gospel of Truth*, those who obtained knowledge from the Savior "find themselves, through paradoxical grace, to be nothing. From the same point of view, however, they may now also see themselves as having not yet come truly into existence" (155). In line with this interpretation, Grace's earthly existence was also nullified after she received the knowledge and she found herself in a paradoxical state occupying a status between the living and the dead. Thus, in the same way as Gnosis has a transformative effect on its recipient in the *Gospel of Truth* Grace's obtainment of knowledge about herself completely reoriented her perspective towards reality. What she had believed to be only a phantom, namely that the intruders who appeared to be living people, actually did exist. And what she had thought to be real, namely that she was a living person, turned out to be false. In the final sequence, Grace states that "No one can make us leave this house," which is followed by the scene of the estate filled with light. Her children recognise that sunlight does not cause any injury to them anymore. At this point, we can note striking similarities with the illustrative passage from the *Gospel of Truth*: "As with one person's ignorance [of another] – when one becomes acquainted, ignorance of the other passes away of its own accord, and as with darkness, which passes away when light appears; so also lack passes away in completion" (NHC, I, 3; 24.32-25.3; see also NHC II, 3; 85.21-29; NHC II, 3; 77.15-26). As I previously mentioned, conversely to its original ancient expressions, Gnosis in Amenábar's film does not have liberating effect for the main characters. This is symbolically suggested by the final shot in which Grace and her children stand at the window of their house. Although Grace gained access to the uncharted, new world, she cannot comprehend its metaphysical structure and her position within, contrarily to ancient Gnostic or Valentinian spiritual. Rather, she attaches to what remained after the world which she once knew.

In a Gnostic limbo

Despite commonalities between the philosophical tenets behind the Valentinian thought and the world presented in *The Others*, the ultimate worldviews stemming from both works are radically different. The truth Grace discovered about herself and her past was neither an ennobling nor an exalting experience, as one could say about Gnostics or Valentinians who believed they shared a particle of God. This "Gnosis" did not give Grace spiritual liberation, but rather left her more perplexed and disoriented. The metaphysical structure of reality or its teleology has become even more mysterious to her than before. Grace found herself without any clue how the reality around her should be viewed, and what its structure and meaning is. In the *Gospel of Philip*, we can find the idea of a "midpoint" which fairly well describes the position of Grace. According to the text, "after this world, there are evils that are truly evil – the thing called 'midpoint.' It is death. While we exist in this world we must acquire resurrection, so that when we put off the flesh we might be found in repose and walk in the midpoint" (NHC II, 3; 66.13-20). Ultimately, Grace's existence was depicted as if she ended in a place of death and for the main part of the narrative, it seemed it was inhabited by hostile beings. She became entrapped between the material and immaterial world, the living and the dead. If we agree that the island along with Grace's estate can be viewed as a symbolic representation of the material world from the Valentinian thought, then it is also worth mentioning the idea of the "pit" formulated in the *Gospel of Truth* (NHC I, 3; 32.18-31), the *Interpretation of Knowledge* (NHC XI, 1; 10.27-34), or in the *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I, 5). In the *Gospel of Truth* as well as in the *Interpretation of Knowledge*, the allegory of the pit is used to picture the Sabbath, cosmos and toils of human existence. In the *Tripartite Tractate*, it is more akin to the concept of "midpoint" from the *Gospel of Philip*. In the former text, it is said that the "pit of ignorance" is also called "the Outer Darkness," "Chaos," "Hades," and "the Abyss" (NHC I, 5; 89.24-28). One could say that the reason why Grace was taken to the perplexing realm situated between the living and the dead was because of her bad deeds: murders and suicide. However, Bertha Mills and other servants were also transferred to the same strange world as Grace but the film makes no suggestions as to whether they committed things as terrifying as Grace when they were still alive.

Conclusions

In this paper, my major concern was to depict that *The Others* incorporates many mythological ideas formulated in two fundamental Valentinian texts: the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Gospel of Philip*. Their pessimistic reinterpretations, however, provide nourishing food for thought. How these alterations can be elucidated and what particular cultural functions might they play for contemporary Western audiences? Why these ideas, which stem from the phenomenon recognized as heretical and suppressed

over the centuries in Western culture, have become attractive to Western viewers? While this essay is not the place to address these complex issues, we can at least suggest a few contexts for further exploration in order to contextualize the findings presented in this essay and better understand the affinities between ancient Gnostic thought and contemporary popular culture: Gnosticism as a form of counter-memory of the Christian past used by individuals to reconnect with Christianity (Dillon 277); post-Christian spirituality, especially of Generation X and Y (Beaudoin; Houtman and Aupers; Mabry; Possamai); occulture (Partridge, *The Re-enchantment*; "Occulture is Ordinary"); psychologization of religion and sacralisation of psychology (Hanegraaff, "The New Age" 378) or the "postmodern sacred" (McAvan). This list should not be, on any account, treated as an exhaustive one. My intention is to show with how many ongoing processes mythical Gnostic ideas in popular culture can be connected to and further examined in order to assess its cultural significance.

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Author's profile: Fryderyk Kwiatkowski – a joint doctoral candidate at the Jagiellonian University and the University of Groningen, he is writing a dissertation on the Gnostic myth in Hollywood (1990– 2003). His research interests revolve around ancient Gnosticism, its reception in the West, and its philosophical affinities with various modern intellectual movements and discourses, such as utopianism, transhumanism, conspiracy theories, or postmodern spiritualities; he has recently published in the *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies*, *Facta Ficta Journal*, *Journal of Religion and Film*. Email: <f.kwiatkowski@rug.nl>